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SUBJECT: SPAIN: ZAPATERO AND RAJOY FACE OFF IN FIRST DEBATE

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Classified By: ACTING DEPUTY CHIEF OF MISSION JOSE SHUMAKE, REASONS 1.4
(B),(D).

11. (C) Summary. There was a lot of wind-milling but no knockout blows landed during the 90 minutes of the February 25 debate. Each candidate's supporters claim victory, and we suspect undecided voters remain so. Neither candidate offered any new messages. Nevertheless, Rajoy probably did himself some good, looking like Zapatero's equal (at least) and repeatedly forcing a sometimes shrill and backward-looking Zapatero to conduct the discussion on his terms. End summary.

12. (U) The first of two scheduled Zapatero-Rajoy debates was held February 25. The topics were the economy, social policy, foreign policy and security, institutional policy (read domestic regional policy), and future challenges. Rajoy got to go first on each topic, giving Zapatero the last word all evening (they will reverse this order in the second and final debate March 3).

13. (U) On the economy, Rajoy went micro, emphasizing the rising prices of basic goods such as milk, bread, and chicken as well as the worsening unemployment numbers. Zapatero went macro, pointing to the budget surplus and emphasizing that unemployment during his term has been the lowest in the modern democratic era. He also repeated what he has said before about economic troubles being a result of international economic circumstances beyond Spain's control. Zapatero spoke approvingly of President Bush's tax rebates, but mainly by way of saying that the opposition in the U.S. supported the President's package while the opposition in Spain only wanted to obstruct the government. On social policy, Rajoy hit immigration hard, making the case that the PSOE's poor handling of this issue was hurting ordinary Spaniards. He acidly suggested Zapatero spent too little time dealing with illegal immigration and too much on initiatives like the Alliance of Civilizations which he said "nobody cares about." Zapatero responded with stem cell research, simplified divorce laws, gay marriage, and by alleging that the PP had mismanaged immigration during Aznar's presidency (when Rajoy was Minister of Interior).

14. (U) The foreign policy and security debate was especially bitter. Rajoy attacked Zapatero for negotiating with ETA, calling the government's policy "frivolous." Zapatero said the last PP administration had seen 238 people in Spain killed by terrorists whereas only four had lost their lives under his government. He blasted the PP as "immoral" for trying to use the terrorism issue for political gain, saying that the PSOE in opposition had supported the PP. Rajoy said that was because the PP policy had made sense. More than once, Zapatero referred to withdrawing Spanish troops from the "illegal" Iraq war. On crime, Zapatero said Rajoy as

Minister of Interior had fewer police on the streets and a higher murder rate. As he did several times when Zapatero claimed his administration had a better record than the PP on various issues, Rajoy said the PP from 1996 to 2004 was climbing out of a hole dug by the long running PSOE government which preceded it. On regional domestic policy, Rajoy accused Zapatero of seeking political advantage at the cost of Spanish national unity. He alleged that Zapatero did not have an "idea of Spain." Zapatero accused Rajoy of hypocrisy in opposing parts of the statute setting up the Catalonia regional government (a region where the PP is unlikely to win many votes) while remaining silent about identical provisions in the statute for Andalusia (where the PP hopes to gain seats). On the challenges of the future, Rajoy spoke about globalization and housing, excoriating Zapatero for inaction on the latter. Zapatero defended his record on housing and spoke about education and climate change. The two candidates got into a tussle about artists who had endorsed Zapatero and been reviled by the PP. Rajoy said the artists had brought it on themselves by implying PP voters were idiots. Zapatero said he did not insult the sports figures who endorsed Rajoy, and Rajoy replied that that was because the athletes had not insulted Zapatero. In their concluding statements, Rajoy mentioned family, housing, jobs, education, respect for the law (i.e., illegal immigration), and national pride. Zapatero again mentioned the "illegal" Iraq war, as well as raising the minimum wage, gender equality, gay marriage, prosperity, jobs, climate change, education, and increased foreign assistance. At one point, Rajoy mentioned that Zapatero kept calling him the worst Minister of Interior in the history of Spanish democracy and said he was waiting for Zapatero to claim to be the best president since Ferdinand and Isabella.

Polls

15. (U) About 13 million Spaniards saw the debate (as a point of reference, 26 million voted in 2004). We saw no surprises in the post-debate commentary. Left-wing journalists said Zapatero won; right-wing journalists said Rajoy won. Several commentators noted Zapatero seemed to be on the defensive, talking a lot about previous PP administrations and said he bobbled the immigration issue. The various snap polls we have seen gave Zapatero the edge but within the margin of error. A Metroscopia poll published in the left-wing daily El Pais said 46 percent thought Zapatero won while 42 percent thought Rajoy was the victor. Interestingly, among respondents who said they did not vote in 2004 (arguably those who leaned towards the PP then but were put off by Iraq and the government's handling of the Madrid train bombings) 47 percent thought Rajoy won while only 36 percent said it was Zapatero. This may say something about swing voters' reactions to the debate. The poll was based on 402 telephone interviews conducted immediately after the debate and had a margin of error of plus or minus five percent. Tellingly, the El Pais headline was "Zapatero wins by the minimum." The major conservative paper, ABC, said Rajoy "cornered" Zapatero on education, immigration, prices, and ETA.

16. (U) The most recent polls conducted before the debate continued to hint at a PSOE lead (but within the margin of error). A Metroscopia poll from February 22 published in El Pais showed the PSOE with 42.3 percent to the PP's 38.6 percent. It pegged turnout at 73-74 percent. The poll was based on 600 telephone interviews and had a margin of error of plus or minus 4.1 percent. Previous similar Metroscopia polls showed PSOE 41.9 to PP 38.9 with 71-72 percent turnout (February 15), PSOE 41.7 to PP 38.8 with 70-71 percent turnout (February 8), and PSOE 42 to PP 38.6 (January 26-30). A recent poll conducted in Catalonia by Centre d'Estudis Opinion (which belongs to the regional government) predicted 58.9 percent voter turnout there (based on telephone interviews of 2,000 people conducted January 21-30 and with a margin of error of plus or minus 2.7 percent). Historically, turnout is slightly higher nationally than in Catalonia, so if that 58.9 percent figure is accurate, it could spell trouble for the PSOE which needs strong turnout to win (as

explained in reftels). Also, any voter turnout predictions could be somewhat inflated by respondents' natural tendency to give the "responsible" answer, reflecting aspirations rather than predicting likely behavior.

Comment

17. (C) The first Spanish presidential debate in 15 years was heated. More than once, the candidates accused each other of lying, trickery, or sowing discord. Going first on each topic worked to Rajoy's advantage, allowing him to set the tone on each topic. Zapatero seemed to feel forced to either follow Rajoy's lead, looking defensive, or ignore what Rajoy said, looking like he had no good answer (as on immigration).

At times, Rajoy seemed quicker on his feet. Zapatero referred to the economic debate a few days ago between Solbes and Pizarro, which many felt Solbes won. Rajoy brushed that away saying this was a debate between him and Zapatero.

18. (C) Little of substance was said on foreign policy, crowded out as it was by ETA. As noted, Zapatero made favorable mention of President Bush's economic stimulus package (mainly in order to compare the PP unfavorably with the Democrats as a loyal opposition), and more than he once mentioned the PP's support for President Bush's "illegal" intervention in Iraq. The pressing international issues of the day (e.g., Kosovo, Afghanistan, etc.) never came up at all.

19. (C) There are many ways to measure victory in a debate (the spin masters are working them all right now), but we think Rajoy -- who probably enjoyed the luxury of low expectations -- accomplished three things. First, he looked at least as presidential as Zapatero. This was partly a result of his apparent calm and partly due to Zapatero's evident nervousness. Zapatero frequently tried to interrupt Rajoy, once forcing Rajoy to shush him and finally causing the moderator to restore a little time to Rajoy. Since these interruptions came from off camera (there was no split screen and few reaction shots), it made Zapatero sound at times more like a heckler than a president. Second, Rajoy seemed to be controlling the conversation (perhaps because he was able to go first each time). Zapatero, as more than one commentator noted afterwards, spent a lot of time talking about the distant failures of past PP administrations and perhaps too little talking about his own accomplishments and plans. Whenever Zapatero tried to drag Aznar, Iraq, or the March 11, 2004, bombings in, Rajoy rebuked him for talking about the past and not the future. Finally, Zapatero must motivate undisciplined PSOE voters who do not always turn out in high numbers. It would have helped if Rajoy had come off as a dangerous reactionary, but he did not. He talked about the challenges facing ordinary Spaniards, and with the exception of Zapatero's passing mentions of Iraq and gay marriage, the two candidates could have swapped their final three minute speeches and few would have noticed. All of this will raise expectations for the March 3 debate and increase the pressure on Zapatero to vindicate himself then.

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